

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

1994

### Bestiary| [Poems]

Matt Yurdana

*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

## Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

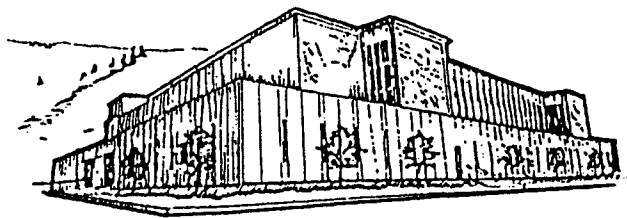
---

### Recommended Citation

Yurdana, Matt, "Bestiary| [Poems]" (1994). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 1664.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1664>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).




# Maureen and Mike MANSFIELD LIBRARY

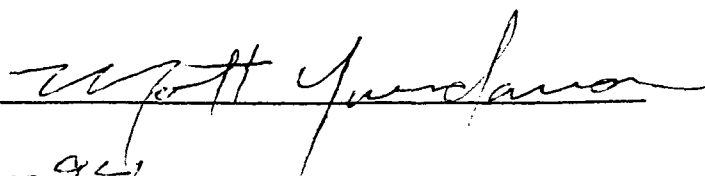
The University of  
**Montana**

---

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

*\*\* Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature\*\**

Yes, I grant permission ☒   
No, I do not grant permission ☐

Author's Signature   
Date: 5-25-94

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.



THE BESTIARY

by

Matt Yurdana

B.A., University of California, Davis, 1989

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

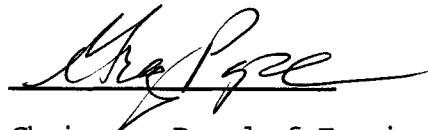
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

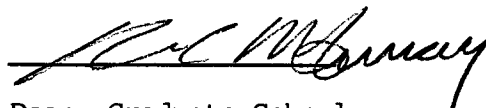
University of Montana

1994

Approved by



Chairman, Board of Examiners



Dean, Graduate School

April 25, 1994

Date

UMI Number: EP34375

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP34375

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to the editors of the following publications in which these poems first appeared.

**Bakunin:** "The Cardiologist's Divorce"

**CutBank:** "A Gathering of Cardiovascular Surgeons"

**Kinesis:** "The Lost Dog"

**Plainsongs:** "Killing Birds," "Last Day in Portugal,"  
"Leaving the Yolo County Raptor Center"

**Poetry Northwest:** "Houdini's Boyhood," "Ontogeny,"  
"The Wheelchair Repairman Watches a Storm,"  
"Agnews State Mental Hospital"

## CONTENTS

### 1.

The Sleep of Bears	5
Ontogeny	7
The Wheelchair Repairman Watches a Storm, Agnews State Mental Hospital	9
The Bestiary	11
A Gathering of Cardiovascular Surgeons	12
The Cardiologist's Divorce	14
Houdini's Boyhood	15

### 2.

Fire at Kwong's Rubber Lizard Factory, Gaoxiong, Taiwan	18
There Was a Linguist and His Son	20
The Magnitude of Ancient Fragments	21
On the Docks, Late August	22
In My Parent's Garage, Prior to Their Moving to Oregon, Rummaging and Listening	23
Last Day in Portugal	24
Leaving Oaxaca	25
Three Small Lessons from Taipei	27

### 3.

How I Remember Aunt Rita	31
Growing Up Near Trains	33
Killing Birds	34
Death of a Pufferfish	36
The Lost Dog	37
The Near Collapse of the Holy Cross Assembly	38
Leaving the Yolo County Raptor Center	39
My Days with Earl Kessler	40

## **PART 1**



## THE SLEEP OF BEARS

The boy wore bright yellow on the green water,  
kicking himself  
toward the center of the lake.

What I remember of his fear comes back  
as sound and color,

the hissing of an inner tube,  
pulling him up into sunlight  
by a fistful of blonde hair.

A flock of blackbirds  
flushed above the trees as his lungs sputtered,  
and to this day I think of their dark wings  
at the sound of splashing.

This is what my own fear brings back  
to comfort me.

These are my first thoughts  
as I watch the drugged bear sleeping  
on the gravel runway.

I climb into the cargo helicopter  
and sit on the floor,  
watching the crew heave against his loose, bristling pelt  
and slide him toward me  
resting his head on my lap,

and because the drugs are unpredictable,  
I slip the barrel of my gun between his teeth and watch

for his narrow eyes to flutter  
or his breathing to change from its deep rattling  
as the helicopter whines and rises  
in its own storm of dust.

We are sending him back,  
but this implies that he has come forward

out of the dark ravines,  
loping over tundra that curves from distance,  
something like a compass in his heart  
thumping and pointing the way  
to our dumpsters and burn piles.

It implies we know where he began.

(stanza break)

So I watch the silver clouds sifting  
through the green hemlocks below us, the harmless lakes  
shimmering like puddles.

I smooth the cinnamon fur  
on his neck,  
and finger his thick burnished claws.

I put my hand on his great snout,  
cold as a dog's nose,

and think of the moment of his waking, smelling me  
and the faint odor of diesel,  
the dim taste of metal  
long after we have left him in a meadow.

And because I cannot imagine a bear having fear,  
he rises on his hind legs, grunting,  
ready to charge into nothing but breeze  
and the humming mosquitoes.

Then we are gone, forgotten,  
and he is drifting upslope through hemlocks.

But today not the wind,  
nor the grinding engine will wake  
this sleeping bear,

and I know I will carry him for years,

cradling his head  
as we fly to a thousand meadows.

I will remove the gun  
and rest my hands in his mouth, staring  
into his muddy eyes

until our lives and their consequences  
fall away,  
until he is pure image.

## ONTOGENY

For seven years  
Doris has dissected cecropia moths,

extracting hormones  
from the reddish powdery heads  
pinned in rows on the wax tablets.

She is pretty like a moth.  
Her hands feather over the probes  
and tiny scalpels,

testing a genetic pesticide which confuses  
the moth's molting pattern,

so that they blunder after adolescence,  
short-winged larvae wobbling  
and fighting their own bodies.

Three months since her husband's cancer  
and Doris still swims at midnight  
in Lake Vasona. She leaves

the silent house, walking  
under red alders and yellow streetlights,  
her shadow pulling  
from each bright spot into darkness,

and buys vodka  
from Harry's 24-hour market  
where a young man from the college  
hovers and asks what she studies.

He hears her say math, and drifts off  
glaring at his shoes,

and Doris understands him,  
like moths quivering  
against the neon beer signs,  
like the pull of hormones,

and her husband's hands unsteady  
on her breasts, as if brittle panes of glass  
formed the husks of their bodies.

Tonight she is guided by sounds,  
the abrupt silence of crickets  
in the hydrangea, mallards gabbling over  
a field of clover, under thin bright stars  
clear as vodka.

(stanza break)

She can hear the whole lake shifting  
the old cans and small pebbles,

and her limbs gleam against the limbs  
of oaks, clothes strewn  
in the dry grass, stepping into water  
that receives her.

Each day moves like this,  
she thinks, the steady pull of crickets  
until dawn,

and pushing through darkness  
which is both now and tomorrow

and buoyant,  
only the sound of breathing,  
fingers going numb,

the moon floating on her belly.

THE WHEELCHAIR REPAIRMAN WATCHES A STORM,  
AGNEWS STATE MENTAL HOSPITAL

The first heavy drops  
chase the patients from the courtyard,

single-file in dull green uniforms  
in the sudden dull light,  
as if the wind carried dusk in the clouds  
bunching on the horizon.

He has known them for 17 years,  
each twitch and murmur, their wide faces  
comfortable as the wrench  
in his hand, the grease gun, rows of wheels,  
the way each tool matches  
its blue outline on the workshop pegboard.

He cannot help Bernard, afternoons,  
heaving the basketball again and again  
two feet short of the hoop,  
rolling after rebounds,  
drool darkening his t-shirt,

or Jolene, who rode wheelies  
in the cafeteria, cracking her skull  
on the checkered tiles.

There is only the shipment of new bearings,  
the tightening of spokes.

He replaces worn tread, stripped bolts,  
threadbare canvas,  
and the wheelchairs go out  
like smooth chariots,  
their crooked bodies gliding  
down the long fluorescent halls.

He follows a nurse, third floor,  
the electric doors  
buzzing inward like metal wings.

There is a boy  
sleeping alone in the rec room,  
strapped from neck to ankles  
to a wheelchair, left wheel sagging,  
as if a great invisible weight  
rides beside him.

(stanza break)

The nurse says Lesch-Nyhan syndrome,  
a demon living  
in his central nervous system,  
making him gnaw  
at the bandaged nubs of his hands  
when they are not cinched  
to the armrests.

The wheel is ruined.  
The boy's breath  
smells of cherry Lifesavers,  
his eyes, two sluggish fish roaming  
in their sleep.

Slowly, he loosens the velcro straps,  
the leather chest restraints,  
and lifts the boy  
who is nothing more than his pajamas  
and clean white gauze.

He steps to the window,  
strong and simple  
like the eucalyptus trees  
pitching along the street,  
leaves and strips of bark swarming  
on the wind.

His reflection  
stands with the yellowing foothills,

towers in the muddied sky  
as the rain pelts  
rows of burnished rooftops.

In this moment, he contains  
the whole city, consuming  
bridges, plazas, the bell tower, spreading  
the length of the expressway,  
small polished cars creeping through him,

a continuous undulation so complete  
he cannot distinguish himself  
from the glass, the wind, or the sleeping boy.

## THE BESTIARY

I want to make love to Carla, my lab partner,  
in the bestiary,

our hands  
fumbling with buttons and zippers  
beneath the jars  
of segmented worms, sea urchins, the coiled hagfish,  
behind the five foot Bolivian iguana,

our gasps  
lost in the hissing  
of a dozen Bunsen burners.

Three hours a week, we huddle together  
scalpels in hand,

and the squids or fetal pigs  
we mutilate so carefully  
are still a mystery. For three hours

this is all we have in common.

If we only had more time, wandering  
among the giant chestnut weevils  
or canisters of spotted tree frogs.

We would know the knobbed whelk from 1965,  
from the coast of Florida,  
propped on its lumpy whorls and sealed  
in a small pool of formaldehyde,

the Indonesian nautilus,  
tentacles lolling  
beyond its tightly chambered shell,

the glowing nudibranchs,  
musk turtles and terrapins  
all bobbing in their jars,

all shelved as if they belonged  
in this storeroom in California.

We might lay naked on our lab coats,  
pointing out  
what was once awkward and strange,

the whole afternoon spent  
touching,  
whispering our names.

## A GATHERING OF CARDIOVASCULAR SURGEONS

Dr. Veer, the keynote speaker, opens  
with a joke about the swiss cheese fondue,

two types of cholesterol, "good"  
and "delicious,"  
and he winks along the banquet, his colleagues  
sipping their aperitifs.

How lovely it was  
to be eager and serious, he says,  
that first open-heart practicum:

an irish setter,  
his limp paws and his thin damp coat,  
his rib cage  
sawed open, arteries clamped  
with small gleaming forceps.

One cannot forget that first time groping  
inside another body.

Everything so close and almost hot,  
and your fingers slip  
under the left ventricle,  
cradling it,

believing in that muscle's steady hitch  
and wobble, as if startled  
by the touch.

By sunset, they have toasted  
that tragic, magnificent dog for hours.

Some lean into the breeze  
on the glass verandah,  
others wade  
in the fountain below the stone boy,  
pouring endlessly  
from his fluted urn.

When the music begins, the timbales  
and congas and horns,

Dr. Dubois in a strapless cocktail gown,  
mambos in tight circles,  
coaxing her lanky husband.

(stanza break)



Dr. Wheeler pulls off his shoes, suspenders  
dangling at his hips.

And Dr. Veer is famous for his rumba.  
He weaves his partner, a first-year intern,  
among the ferns and palmettos

and the courtyard clears.

She is blushing, her dress whisking  
from her thighs  
with the lazy swish of maracas.

Her feet chase  
his quick, sweeping half-steps.

A few moments,  
and she finds the pattern,  
swinging and pulling  
from his arms, tight as a shadow or mirror.

She feels the whispers and nods,

his right hand hovering  
near the small of her back.

## THE CARDIOLOGIST'S DIVORCE

On his office wall  
there is a diagram  
of the conducting system of the heart.

He is the sinus node,  
a specialized tissue

one-tenth the size of a raisin,

near the entrance of the right atrium,  
the pacemaker  
that dictates impulse and contraction.

She is the atrioventricular node,  
a similar bundle of cells and fibers

located millimeters down  
the blood stream  
at the juncture of the ventricle.

She suffers  
from emotional angina.

She waits for each signal  
and responds a fraction sooner  
than her own inclination,

always in accordance  
with his working rhythm.

Their divorce, like the classic experiment  
by Herman Stannius,  
the German physiologist,

will ligature the connection  
between nodes, stopping

all synapses like silent tongues.

There will be the slightest pause,  
a small hiccup,  
before the heart keeps pumping.

## HOUDINI'S BOYHOOD

He slips from the house, no lights,  
an hour before dawn,  
  
the world taking the shape of sounds,  
  
his footfall  
on the graveled levee,  
  
and farther,  
the only streetlight in town  
buzzing from yellow to red,  
  
and beyond that, a rising squall  
which is the great flocks of geese  
waking in Delmer's alfalfa.  
  
At the water's edge,  
he crawls  
under an old refrigerator box  
  
disguised with mud,  
cattails, long limp strands of tule.  
  
He has seen hunters lie down  
in the fields of young winter wheat,  
hidden with netting  
  
and old burlap  
an hour before first light,  
  
the frost melting under their bodies,  
  
as if they waited beneath  
the landscape,  
  
geese wheeling at daybreak  
over the field they had become.  
  
And now hundreds arrive,  
surround him,  
the yelping and straining wings  
from every Spring morning of his life,  
  
as light slowly defines  
the one small hole that allows the marsh in.

(stanza break)

Everything he learns, he learns  
in darkness,  
the long painful crouching,  
to balance his weight with his toes,

He breathes shallow and silent

in the middle of these birds  
that preen and squabble  
into a new day, nudging the cardboard,

and he is convinced  
he is not here.

## **PART 2**

FIRE AT KWONG'S RUBBER LIZARD FACTORY,  
GAOXIONG, TAIWAN

It happened on a Monday during the Month of the Dead.  
The milky smoke rolled above the expressway,  
down the alleys where families burned holy money  
in hammered brass tins for their dead relations,  
sending prosperity up in thin columns of sparks and ashes.

Food was heaped at the temples to keep them happy.  
Widows and lovers avoided swimming in rivers  
where it was said the spirits of unlucky men  
slept under the stones and rushing water.  
Some fretted the whole month, puttering at home,  
as if a thin door could hold back  
the memory of lost children.

When the crowds came slouching up Shou Bei street  
the swing shift was already gasping in the yard.  
A bitter latex haze colored the sunset.  
People flinched and murmured as the windows burst  
and the roof blackened like the shadows of flames.

It was Lao Wu, the old janitor, who crawled out last,  
weeping and dragging his glowing chain of keys  
behind him. From the boiler room,  
he had first heard the fire as a deep rumble  
and before he topped the stairs the heat  
pressed his chin to the concrete floor.

Everywhere burned. Paint blistered on the vats  
of rubber. Lightbulbs popped. The old sprinklers  
hung like rusty brands from the ceiling.

And Lao Wu crawled and moaned  
like a man who has touched and smelled  
his own death, and his hair melting in clumps  
and his scorched hands pulling him along,  
were like the conveyers of burning lizards  
leaping one by one into the green  
bubbling pool of themselves.

And in that mass of bodies  
becoming one, he saw the face of his father  
as it had been in 1939, just after the stroke:  
the wilting mouth, the swollen tongue,  
the terrible left eye that saw everything  
a boy did and nothing at all.

It was then he began to weep  
for the pain he had forgotten,

weeping and crawling into the cool evening,  
into the crowd of murmurs and painful hands  
like a child belonging to them all,  
wide-eyed and misshapen, already shivering  
in their cool damp blankets.

## THERE WAS A LINGUIST AND HIS SON

There was a linguist and his son  
driving across Nevada.  
After lunching in Lovelock  
the linguist began pointing  
off the shimmery highway,  
and his son, five years old,  
followed his hand as it touched  
on animals and landmarks.  
He told the boy that everything  
has a sound, each lizard,  
tree, and mountain range  
vocalizing, and this music  
is the way the world speaks  
with itself. So the boy  
began talking in high-pitched  
chirps to the sparrows  
feeding in the roadside sage.  
He hummed through his nose  
at the tires of passing cars.  
He puffed out his cheeks  
in a half-buzz, half-rumble  
as clouds lumbered in groups  
over a distant water tower.  
They stopped at a Texaco  
and he gurgled, and felt  
the hose thrumming in his hands  
as his father pumped the gas.  
But the most beautiful thing  
he discovered was the car's  
grill, smothered with a mosaic  
of crushed insects, tattered  
moths and bees faded  
to the color of the road.  
Some were beyond recognition  
and he fingered the stiff wings,  
guessing with clicks or whines  
at the sounds that defined them.  
He touched one and it moved.  
A twisted grasshopper, its legs  
pinned with grime and the juices  
of other bugs. He pried it loose  
and it wobbled in his hand.  
"Fuck off," it said.



## THE MAGNITUDE OF ANCIENT FRAGMENTS

Like the exhuming of a giant,  
the site stretched fifteen acres, trenched  
and leveled. The archaeologist brought  
tractors, cranes, and a diesel winch

to dredge the sandy hillside,  
but only salvaged one hand, one foot, marked  
with the crosshatch of straining cables,  
a compound of stains and scars.

Too bulky for halls or galleries,  
the ancient fragments loom above magnolias  
and the palms and statues posing  
along the walkways of the museum's piazza.

It is no surprise the tourist  
after visiting sacred Egyptian objects  
and collections of chipped pottery  
or questionable arrowheads, strolls back

to these toes the size of boulders,  
this massive hand, somewhere between  
pointing and waving. The retired couples  
take photos, smiling like teens

beside the huge instep. Children dream  
of hoisting themselves into the hand  
with fingers curling like slender trees.  
And everyone touches those old, sand-worn

stones, and marvels at how things so large  
could hide for centuries without a trace,  
imagining how it stood above everything,  
with legs, arms, torso, a face.

## ON THE DOCKS, LATE AUGUST

The pink mooring buoys hang  
from the gunwales  
like the swim bladders of chum salmon,  
globed and slippery.  
The coiled steel cable  
has rusted the same deep umber  
as the wolffish,  
flecked and crusty as the rocks  
it hides under.  
And the skewed levers and wires  
jutting from the bad hydraulics  
mimic the splayed pectoral fins of a sculpin,  
as it drifts with the tide,  
with the diesel and sinking branches.  
We come home to the docks  
each night, exhausted  
and we walk the loose planks stained  
every few yards  
with the shapes of what we bring with us:  
the canary rockfish  
fading slowly as daylight,  
shrimp kicking in a dry coffee can  
like the drumming of fingers,  
a flounder gaffed  
above its crowded eyes,  
underside as big and white  
as a freshly laundered sheet.  
And a man pulls an octopus  
inside out in a bucket of inky water,  
water black as the closet  
I locked Cheryl Swaney in  
when I was seven,  
black for hours,  
and when I opened the door  
she only whimpered  
and wouldn't come out.

IN MY PARENT'S GARAGE, PRIOR TO THEIR MOVING TO OREGON,  
RUMMAGING AND LISTENING

I find a framed lithograph,  
"Shooting Passenger Pigeons, Louisiana, 1869,"  
wedged between a set of macrame place mats  
and a toaster oven with its elements  
jutting like antennas, in a pile  
growing and waiting for the Salvation Army.  
Behind barns and trees, pigeons rise  
like a dark tornado funneling skyward.  
Farmers roam the fields with guns.  
In this light, the man  
with the terrier tense at his heels  
looks like my father.  
He has the same nose and thin knobby knees.  
As far as I know, my father  
has never been to Louisiana.  
The only hunting he talks about  
happened in 1955, after two years  
stationed in Italy, while visiting  
relatives in Kastav, Yugoslavia.  
His cousin, Voiko, owned a scooter.  
The morning before he flew home,  
already drunk on plum brandy,  
they drove the willow-lined paths  
to the marsh, watched blurry geese  
flap out of range and the bobbing reeds  
the color of brass. They nipped  
from a cold flask, staying drunk enough  
to ignore the silence between them.  
Two young men who knew  
they would grow old  
without ever knowing one another.  
But on the ride back, a pheasant flushed  
like a frenetic moth  
killing itself against the headlight.  
Voiko staggered over to the bird  
and clutched its limp neck.  
He clicked his tongue, dancing slow circles,  
laughing into the trees,  
kissing my father tenderly on both cheeks  
in the presence of this miracle,  
a gift my father cradled, a feathered relic  
already stiffening in his hands,  
as he slumped behind his cousin  
and the scooter weaved home by moonlight.

## LAST DAY IN PORTUGAL

The train staggers  
the length of the country,  
lurching and hissing for mail drops,  
for sheep crossing near  
Viana do Castelo, through valleys  
and low-roofed towns engulfed  
by the dank vineyards  
we can smell through  
cracked windows. I am counting  
rows of fruit trees  
high on the rolling horizon.  
My brother is asleep  
beside me on the cramped seat,  
our knees banging.  
Last week, he shaved his head  
in Madrid, in a salon  
where the hairdresser cried,  
"mira, mira!" to girls loitering  
in the shade of the drugstore,  
as she dragged the clippers  
over his scalp and clumps fell  
on her yellow slippers  
and the little potted plants,  
and she only cackled  
when he tried to pay.  
This is our last day in Portugal,  
and my brother is asleep,  
the stubbly knob of his head  
knocking against my shoulder,  
a little drool on his chin.  
I want to hold his beautiful head  
and point to the horizon  
with its galloping fruit trees,  
and feed him sandwiches  
stuffed with tomatoes and cheese,  
and apologize for the pain  
and torment I brought  
to his childhood. I want  
to haul him wobbling  
from sleep and wander  
through the passenger cars  
back to the caboose.  
I want us to stink  
of grease and rust,  
and clutch the black railing,  
and hear the long whistle,  
and swing the red lantern  
above the warped tracks  
that shine and carry us along.

## LEAVING OAXACA

I watch you enter the shade  
of the bodega  
for a bottle of red wine,  
holding your left sandal  
like a hammer,  
crushing the black widows  
that hang at the edge of shadows.

Lupita's son  
scoops butterflies  
off the stiff rose buds  
with a plastic cup,  
and with a look like concentration,  
he pinches them one by one  
and lets them fall,  
trembling on the lawn.  
It is a tough evening for insects.

I can hear the day slipping away,  
the beer vendors  
coughing down calle Volcanes,  
dogs giving up the shade,  
a radio plays Malaguena  
from an open window  
above the drugstore.

You say the thunderstorms are a comfort.  
You can see them coming,  
drenching the afternoons briefly,  
until the plants  
and roofs and pavement steam.

I will take that smell with me,  
and this hammock  
and these two bending trees,  
and yesterday, you and I  
wandering at the market,

our goodbyes said weeks earlier  
in the way you walk boldly  
across traffic,  
the way you stare  
into those worn green mountains.

Not buying, just a slow passage  
through a maze  
of shouts and stalls.

(no stanza break)

A woman sat on a tarp  
behind five mounds of chapulines,  
the traditional food of love,  
small grasshoppers fried whole  
in lemon and garlic.

She wagged a finger at me,  
winking, muttering  
and you translated,  
"try these gringo,  
and you'll stay, never leave."

I bit through the tortilla  
and they were brittle and sour,  
their little spurs  
catching on my tongue.  
"Chew them slowly," she said,  
"and swallow."

## THREE SMALL LESSONS FROM TAIPEI

1.

From here there is a view of terrible balance.  
Broad-leafed plants and T.V. antennas lean out  
over rooftops. Below, beyond a fence,  
a bottle lies unbroken on a pitched roof, caught  
at the edge between two adjacent tiles.  
A small balcony holds a washing machine  
with no lid. The water slowly fills  
then sloshes just below the rim. Between  
each object what holds, and in turn, is held?  
How can I sit on this tenth-story veranda  
above markets, traffic, the distant rice fields,  
while nothing collapses or fails to stand  
without an air of tension? Yet all seems fine,  
together and separate, like clothes on a line.

2.

Three mounds of bean sprouts, a tin of Jasmine tea,  
the blue and pimpled skin of chicken legs  
and rows of pigs feet, hooves still wet and shiny,  
a smell of incense, curry, and boiled egg  
behind the piles of cabbage placed beside  
stacks of baskets and sturdy unwashed bowls,  
under strings of garlic, drying squid  
and a single glaring light bulb,  
he stands, humming quietly, splitting chickens  
with three quick strokes from thighs to neck,  
while she kneels before a large metal basin  
filled with tiny mussels, streaked gray and black  
beneath the clear water like polished stones,  
turning them over and over in her hands.



3.

They are graceful, like an egret's  
flawless black legs and balanced neck, the women  
strolling in pairs beside the tennis courts,  
bellies round with Dragon babies, while pigeons  
return to rooftops and the sparrows feed  
in the high grass between benches.  
Sometimes fish roll upward, flashing green  
against the dark river. Their small splashes  
are concentric circles growing larger.  
Once, on an evening like this, three fishermen  
threw their nets across the water  
in long magnificent curves, and like children,  
with their hands behind them, bowed and grinned  
before they hauled the nets back in.

## **PART 3**

## HOW I REMEMBER AUNT RITA

The gas station is out of gas until noon.  
I wait with Paul, the attendant,  
by the immaculate green rows of motor oil.

My Aunt Rita's funeral begins in three hours.  
I remember Christmas, nine years old,  
Aunt Rita in her lavender dress,

full-blown roses smelling of cold cream,  
so happy to see us, her eyes glistened.  
When she clutched me to her waist,

my left ear pressed into her hip bone  
and the skin above her elbows shook.  
And she hung on, as if each Christmas

I would forget more of her, as if that house  
tilting toward the Pacific,  
the smell of wet wool and anchovies,

and the toads and crickets singing  
beneath her rosebush could vanish  
in the oncoming fog of adolescence.

Geese fly over the station.  
Paul sights them over his thumb and index finger,  
"I love them honkers," he says,

and pulls the imaginary trigger.  
He tells me they mate for life.  
Their cheek patches are like fingerprints.

He tells me of a cold October morning  
when he stripped off his camouflage  
and crawled, gun in hand, across a frozen pond,

his stomach frostbitten and bleeding,  
toward geese squabbling behind a tangle of willows  
until he was a barrel-length away,

until he could hear the rustle and click  
of feathers being preened, feet slapping the bank,  
the little clouds of breath rising from their bills.

"I can prove it," he says,  
raising his shirt over his belly.  
And above the stretch marks and the glossy scar

(stanza break)

where doctors removed his appendix,  
flies the tattoo of a lone goose,  
wings stretching across his rib cage,

gaining altitude, its head pointing north,  
so blue against his pale skin  
I believe him.

## GROWING UP NEAR TRAINS

Our small town flickers at dusk  
and holds nothing left to abuse.  
The battered mailbox, cats trapped in dumpsters,  
even sprayed obscenities on a roadside farmhouse

have lost their drama. Friday nights,  
the flicker turns to a steady glow.  
We gulp illegal beers and stagger  
out to the empty depot,

where a northbound Southern Pacific  
highballs into darkness. The whistle leans  
up-track, wheels glance the rails  
with every lurch of the train.

We clamber a thin-planked bridge  
while the freight rumbles below  
like a goaded beast, each long belly  
stuffed with lumber or livestock, one eye slowly

sweeping and beaming the way to Portland.  
The bridge becomes a saddle  
and we sway above the passing weight,  
riding the rusty, mile-long animal

without moving at all. And into the night  
we send a volley of hoots and empty bottles  
christening all down its blundering length,  
a hollow shatter that's almost musical.

## KILLING BIRDS

Still clumsy  
in their juvenile  
plumage, twenty tree sparrows

flit across  
the road in loose flocks.  
Six of them patter between

the headlights  
then tumble and flap  
in the rear-view mirror.

He turns back.  
He's never seen birds,  
only heard tweet and chatter

from the trees,  
chirps in the brambles,  
at most a glimpse of blurred wings

or glance at  
the small silhouettes  
that dot the drooping phone lines.

He parks, leaves  
the car idling,  
kneels in the roadside gravel.

Their bodies  
are nearly weightless  
and warm against his fingers;

this one: dark  
whisker stripe and crown,  
the bill badly chipped and split,

half-closed lids.  
That one: a stiff, crushed  
wing and heavily streaked breast.

Necks swivel  
at shocking angles.  
Each tail is notched, a simple,

shallow "V."  
He kneels until his legs  
ache, until each mark and line

(stanza break)

is remembered  
and the whole image  
of sparrow burns in his mind.

Carefully,  
he tucks one beneath  
a patch of woolly mullein,

stashes three  
behind a road sign,  
another in the tangle

of ragweed,  
until every bird  
is properly out of sight.

## DEATH OF A PUFFERFISH

It is a condition resembling depression.  
Like a weak balloon, he follows the current  
into the Gulf of Mexico and forgets  
his romantic, sometimes ravenous, youth  
when he tucked loosely in a vesicular sac.

For the first time in his life  
he looks up, notices it is shallow,  
a shifting cerulean blue  
as demanding as a low ceiling.

He wonders what causes this terminal deflating,  
how he maintains his meager circumference.  
The familiar grooves in his reef miles behind,  
he finds this open water irritating.  
With each new moon, the tide pulls hard  
and he follows, and diminishes.



## THE LOST DOG

He breaks the weakest link  
with a few startled strides past his own worn circle  
    around the peach tree,  
breaks into a run across the yard,  
flustering chickens, laundry dropping from the lines  
    in his wake,  
shouts and whistles from the open window  
as he clears the fence, clears the weedy culvert,  
as the road turns from muddy ruts, to gravel, to pavement.  
He runs southeast because the daffodils point that way.  
He runs like a rabbit bolting through tumbleweeds.  
He runs down the yellow line. His paws click pavement  
as he runs and his shoulders bunch, and his tongue,  
thick with slobber, wags over his shoulder.  
He runs to remember what running was like,  
sprinting into town, past neighborhoods, past the mailman,  
the drugstore, the post office and diner, pedestrians gawking  
    from the sidewalks,  
the swerve and honk of cars, and main street narrowing  
    like a funnel.  
He runs full-tilt through the rush hour.  
He runs with six feet of galvanized chain rattling  
    behind him.  
He runs beside his reflection in the spinning of hubcaps,  
through exhaust and oil, through each intersection.  
He runs and runs and the street lights burn green.

## THE NEAR COLLAPSE OF THE HOLY CROSS ASSEMBLY

The land behaves like water,  
rippling the asphalt past the corner of 3rd and Montgomery,

where a mailbox topples and hydrants  
burst and shower

the open convertibles and store front windows,  
where the Holy Cross Assembly

dodders  
beside the jolted parking meters.

Each heave, like a wave  
through the unhinged doors, rolls

beneath the mahogany pews. The walls splinter.  
A crucifix

falls two stories of stained glass, impaling the Wurlitzer.  
It buckles but stands

on this Monday morning,  
the land slowing like a pendulum,

43 seconds,  
as slow as the briefest pain,

candles and relics rocking back into place,  
the slow sun

utterly quiet on the fractured glass,  
somewhere inside a thin hissing of steam.

## LEAVING THE YOLO COUNTY RAPTOR CENTER

Down rows of rusty, chicken-wire cages  
I dole out dead mice and quartered hamsters  
and scrub the chalky crust off perches.  
For months, the osprey suffered bumble foot.  
The yellowed talons and feet curled  
like my uncle Edward's hands, left crippled  
from toiling on fishing boats, hands that stayed  
blue-veined and callused, cradling his morning coffees  
in a kitchen soured from years of cod and herring.  
And the dusty, tatter-winged plumage  
of the turkey vulture recalls  
grandma Lorraine, shuffling thin-boned  
under a gloomy housecoat, her nose  
keen as a blade, head bald and wrinkled  
beneath a silver wig. I cannot ignore  
my family, stooped and flapping  
their days into weeks, months into years.  
Aunt Gloria the nervous falcon, my mother  
the harrier with a busted tail,  
cousin Kenny, a barn owl with bones  
that droop and fuse like soldered wires.  
They're found slumped at the base  
of telephone poles or limping off highways  
or brought in by the well-meaning and confused,  
tucked and bleeding in an old shoe box.  
They keep coming because I remind them  
of what they used to be, ignorant, young and ambitious,  
earning my way through school, as I shuffle  
from cage to cage, gazing out at the same  
chicken-wire view. Each dusk,  
before I unlatch the gate, they tremble on perches,  
squawk and hoot from the dark cages,  
calling to me in the failing light  
as if I could bring back their lives.

## MY DAYS WITH EARL KESSLER

No words, no variety, the forklifts  
droning in the warehouse  
as I packed frozen salmon for 3 months  
and 2 weeks, 12 hours a day,  
across from Earl Kessler  
in the cold room of Phoenix Seafoods.

Earl wore a thick purple sock  
on the stump that was his left arm,  
sometimes pointing it my way  
when I became sloppy or lazy,  
or when my box slipped from the conveyer,  
the fish falling solid as bricks.

But mostly it kept our tempo,  
a small pendulum measuring the hours  
between breaks, and I knew the rumor  
of how he lost the rest,  
a few wrong inches  
after 12 hours with a hay baler  
on a farm in Nevada,

or that other rumor,  
how he gouged a man's eyes  
with that single crooked thumb,

or the one I almost believed,  
that he was mauled  
by three Dobermans and a pit bull  
on his mother's 35th birthday,  
stumbling into the house, holding  
what was left of his elbow  
as she was blowing out the candles.

Mornings before work there was no horizon,  
no imprint in the fog  
dividing sky from water, rows of boats  
adrift on the air.

I would pour our coffee from Earl's thermos  
while we leaned on the hull  
of an upturned skiff, watching the net menders  
spooling mounds of herring web,  
the small harbor waking in the fog,

convinced I was learning what it meant to work,  
to pass unharmed through the days  
of boredom and stiff fingers.

(no stanza break)

I carried the image of those beautiful boats  
like a kind of medicine,  
down into the cold room  
where we stooped over the heavy fish  
until our backs were sweating  
and we breathed in unison.

I haven't learned much since.  
The rumors and foggy mornings are touchstones,  
and when I choose to see Earl Kessler  
it is that Saturday I spied him upriver,

shirtless, straddling a dead log,  
his head, shoulders, and ruined arm  
covered with bread crumbs,  
and a flock of chickadees  
falling and rising from his body.